

Pragmatism: Modernism Recycled

Scripture: Psalm 31:1; Psalm 33:16–17; Zechariah 4:6; Romans 1:16; James 4:4; 1 Peter 1:23; 1 Peter 5:11; 1 John 2:1; 1 John 2:16–17

Code: A393

Is Pragmatism Really a Serious Threat?

I am convinced that pragmatism poses precisely the same subtle threat to the church in our age that modernism represented nearly a century ago.

Modernism was a movement that embraced higher criticism and liberal theology while denying nearly all the supernatural aspects of Christianity. But modernism did not first surface as an overt attack on orthodox doctrine. The earliest modernists seemed concerned primarily with interdenominational unity. They were willing to downplay doctrine for that goal, because they believed doctrine was inherently divisive and a fragmented church would become irrelevant in the modern age. To heighten Christianity's relevance, modernists sought to synthesize Christian teachings with the latest insights from science, philosophy, and literary criticism.

Modernists viewed doctrine as a secondary issue. They emphasized brotherhood and experience and de-emphasized doctrinal differences. Doctrine, they believed, should be fluid and adaptable—certainly not something worth fighting for. In 1935, John Murray gave this assessment of the typical modernist:

The modernist very often prides himself on the supposition that he is concerned with life, with the principles of conduct and the making operative of the principles of Jesus in all departments of life, individual, social, ecclesiastical, industrial, and political. His slogan has been that Christianity is life, not doctrine, and he thinks that the orthodox Christian or fundamentalist, as he likes to name him, is concerned simply with the conservation and perpetuation of outworn dogmas of doctrinal belief, a concern which makes orthodoxy in his esteem a cold and lifeless petrification of Christianity. ["The Sanctity of the Moral Law," *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 1:193.]

When harbingers of modernism began to appear in the late 1800s, few Christians were troubled. The most heated controversies in those days were relatively small backlashes against men like Charles Spurgeon—men who were trying to warn the church about the threat. Most Christians—particularly church leaders—were completely unreceptive to such warnings. After all, it wasn't as if outsiders were imposing new teachings on the church; these were people from within the denominations—and scholars, at that. Certainly they had no agenda to undermine the core of orthodox theology or attack the heart of Christianity itself. Divisiveness and schism seemed far greater dangers than apostasy.

But whatever the modernists' motives at first, their ideas did represent a grave threat to orthodoxy, as history has proved. The movement spawned teachings that decimated practically all the mainline denominations in the first half of this century. By downplaying the importance of doctrine, modernism opened the door to theological liberalism, moral relativism, and rank unbelief. Most evangelicals

today tend to equate the word "modernism" with full-scale denial of the faith. It is often forgotten that the aim of the early modernists was simply to make the church more "modern," more unified, more relevant, and more acceptable to a skeptical modern age.

Just like the pragmatists today.

Like the church of a hundred years ago, we live in a world of rapid changes—major advances in science, technology, world politics, and education. Like the brethren of that generation, Christians today are open, even eager, for change in the church. Like them, we yearn for unity among the faithful. And like them, we are sensitive to the hostility of an unbelieving world.

Unfortunately, there is at least one other parallel between the church today and the church in the late nineteenth century: many Christians seem completely unaware—if not unwilling to see—that serious dangers threaten the church from within. Yet if church history teaches us anything, it teaches us that the most devastating assaults on the faith have always begun as subtle errors arising from within.

Living in an unstable age, the church cannot afford to be vacillating. We minister to people desperate for answers, and we cannot soft-pedal the truth or extenuate the gospel. If we make friends with the world, we set ourselves at enmity with God. If we trust worldly devices, we automatically relinquish the power of the Holy Spirit.

These truths are repeatedly affirmed in Scripture: "Do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4). "Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:1).

"The king is not saved by a mighty army; a warrior is not delivered by great strength. A horse is a false hope for victory; nor does it deliver anyone by its great strength" (Psalm 33:16, 17). "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, and rely on horses, and trust in chariots because they are many, and in horsemen because they are very strong, but they do not look to the Holy One of Israel, nor seek the Lord!" (Psalm 31:1). "'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the Lord of hosts" (Zechariah 4:6).

Is Worldliness Still a Sin?

Worldliness is rarely even mentioned today, much less identified for what it is. The word itself is beginning to sound quaint. *Worldliness* is the sin of allowing one's appetites, ambitions, or conduct to be fashioned according to earthly values. "All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:16-17).

Yet today we have the extraordinary spectacle of church programs designed explicitly to cater to fleshly desire, sensual appetites, and human pride—"the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life." To achieve this worldly appeal, church activities often go beyond the merely frivolous. For several years a colleague of mine has been collecting a "horror file" of clippings that report how churches are employing innovations to keep worship services from becoming dull. In

the past half decade, some of America's largest evangelical churches have employed worldly gimmicks like slapstick, vaudeville, wrestling exhibitions, and even mock striptease to spice up their Sunday meetings. No brand of horseplay, it seems, is too outrageous to be brought into the sanctuary. Burlesque is fast becoming the liturgy of the pragmatic church.

Moreover, many in the church believe this is the only way we will ever reach the world. If the unchurched multitudes don't want traditional hymns and biblical preaching, we are told, we must give them what they want. Hundreds of churches have followed precisely that theory, actually surveying unbelievers to learn what it would take to get them to attend.

Subtly the goal is becoming church attendance and acceptance rather than a transformed life. Preaching the Word and boldly confronting sin are seen as archaic, ineffectual means of winning the world. After all, those things actually drive most people away. Why not entice people into the fold by offering what they want, creating a friendly, comfortable environment, and catering to the very desires that constitute their strongest urges? As if we might get them to accept Jesus by somehow making Him more likable or making His message less offensive.

That kind of thinking badly skews the mission of the church. The Great Commission is not a marketing manifesto. Evangelism does not require salesmen, but prophets. It is the Word of God, not any earthly enticement, that plants the seed for the new birth (1 Peter 1:23). We gain nothing but God's displeasure if we seek to remove the offense of the cross (1 Peter 5:11).

Is All Innovation Wrong?

Please do not misunderstand my concern. It is not innovation *per se* that I oppose. I recognize that styles of worship are always in flux. I also realize that if the typical seventeenth-century Puritan walked into Grace Community Church (where I am pastor) he might be shocked by our music, probably dismayed to see men and women seated together, and quite possibly disturbed that we use a public address system. Spurgeon himself would not appreciate our organ. But I am not in favor of a stagnant church. And I am not bound to any particular musical or liturgical style. Those things in and of themselves are not issues Scripture even addresses. Nor do I think my own personal preferences in such matters are necessarily superior to the tastes of others. I have no desire to manufacture some arbitrary rules that govern what is acceptable or not in church services. To do so would be the essence of legalism.

My complaint is with a philosophy that relegates God's Word to a subordinate role in the church. I believe it is unbiblical to elevate entertainment over preaching and worship in the church service. And I stand in opposition to those who believe salesmanship can bring people into the kingdom more effectively than a sovereign God. That philosophy has opened the door to worldliness in the church.

"I am not ashamed of the gospel," the apostle Paul wrote (Romans 1:16). Unfortunately, "ashamed of the gospel" seems more and more apt as a description of some of the most visible and influential churches of our age.

I see striking parallels between what is happening in the church today and what happened a hundred years ago. The more I read about that era, the more my conviction is reinforced that we are seeing history repeat itself.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2024 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<https://www.gty.org/about#copyright>).